Editorial

Baldwin, Lynne P.

active learning in higher education

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LYNNE P. BALDWIN *Brunel University, UK*

Whether you are working within the higher education sector in the UK or elsewhere, you are engaged in one way or another in personal development planning (PDP). This is high on the agenda in the UK; the Quality Assurance Agency (the QAA), which reviews the quality and standards of UK higher education by auditing each institution, rightly requires that we have mechanisms in place to ensure that learners have opportunities for PDP. The QAA says that learners must have 'a means by which [they] can monitor, build and reflect upon their personal development (termed personal development planning)'. Many in HE have interpreted this to mean that learners must construct a formal, written document, that is, a folder/portfolio of their learning experience whilst at university. It might be argued, however, that much of our personal development, whether in university, home or anywhere else, is *informal* for the most part; we do not record (write down) all our learning experiences, successes and failures in life! 'Personal development' is, surely, very much about the *personal* aspects of our development, and much of this we do not make public, for various reasons. 'Personal development' should not be seen, in my view, as another phrase for 'planning our career'. Learning, and life, is about much more than (preparing for) *work*, important though that is to many of us, whether students or academics.

Opportunities for PDP abound. The nature and scope of these opportunities vary, and they may be formal and/or more informal. Working with our fellow colleagues on a piece of research or discussing how to structure an examination paper are but two examples of opportunities for PDP, as might be a formal review, often annually, with our head of department (or whoever). It is, in my view, important to remember that PDP should not be merely a paper exercise, although writing things down can sometimes help, whether for PDP or anything else, of course. As independent adults, it should be entirely our own (and our learners') choice as to how, when and where we 'monitor, build and reflect upon [our] personal development', although if some need guidance, this should naturally be provided. Regardless of how we do it, however, the benefits of PDP are uncontested. After all, *reflection* is central to our development, as humans. This is as much

the case for learners in the context of higher education as it is for us, as educators. This issue takes as its theme reflection, and each of the six articles looks at this both within and outside of the context of the classroom.

In the study reported by John MacMillan and Monica McLean in the first article, entitled 'Making first-year tutorials count: operationalizing the assessment-learning connection', reflection is concerned with how first-year undergraduates perceive their performance. The learning environment is in part shaped by us, the educators, and the signals that we send about this, and the performance of individual learners, are conveyed in various ways; assessment is naturally a vital channel. How learners perceive their growing competence is to a greater or lesser extent dependent on the form and timing of the assessments that we design and the feedback that we provide. Described in this article is a module comprising regular tutorials and, importantly, frequent and swiftly delivered formative feedback to learners aimed at fostering such reflection at this first, important, stage of their learning in higher education. Learners who are new to higher education are also the focus of the second article entitled 'Degrees of disciplinarity in equipping mature students in higher education for engagement and success in lifelong learning', by Bob Toynton. Here reflection is considered in the context of how learners attempt the new and often difficult task of adapting to a learning environment which takes the notion of a 'discipline' as its cornerstone. We, as educators, assume that disciplinarity is a known, but Toynton argues that we need to do more to make this explicit if our learners, mature or otherwise, are to develop the awareness of the 'restrictiveness of the discipline-based environment' and to develop the skills of critical reflection required for successful learning both within, and beyond, higher education.

In the third article, entitled 'A review of the one-minute paper', David Stead reports on a little-used but highly-praised activity known as the 'one-minute paper'. As its name suggests, its use requires very little time and, importantly, little effort. Literature in higher education abounds with activities which have been successfully used in classes with very small numbers. For those of us whose classes now comprise 400 or more learners as the norm, it is thus refreshing and much welcomed to read about an activity which all of us could use, regardless of class size or discipline. In addition, for those reluctant to embrace technology, or who for whatever reason do not (wish to) use it, the only thing needed is a piece of paper. Stead notes that the need for our learners to reflect is a tenet of constructivism and is also one of the four elements of Kolb's learning cycle. Reflection takes the form of what learners perceive that they have, or have not, learned in the classroom and provides an opportunity for the asking of questions, another higher-order cognitive skill.

The *use* of these higher-order cognitive skills in the workplace is the focus of the fourth article by Veronica Burke, Ian Jones and Mike Doherty. Entitled 'Analysing student perceptions of transferable skills via undergraduate degree programmes', reflection on learning forms an essential element.

Reflection on learning *between* classroom sessions is the topic for analysis by Graeme Kirkpatrick in the fifth paper. Entitled 'Online "chat" facilities as pedagogic tools: a case study', there is a critical assessment of the now widely-used 'chat' component of a tool forming part of a generic facility/platform called Blackboard; very useful indeed for those who may not have used it before but may be interested in so doing. The study set out to compare the efficacy of the 'chat' facility of Blackboard to other teaching environments and how, as a result of the findings, it might be used more effectively. As the author rightly concludes, the 'interesting anomaly' in the article concerns the perception of the lecturer about the amount of 'nonsense' that each environment generates; it is a useful and absorbing read.

Whether or not you use, or may be considering using, Blackboard, it is certain that you will, in one way or another, be very much involved in PDP, that is, Personal Development Planning, the topic of the sixth and final article. Entitled 'A progress report on progress files: the experience of one higher education institution', Rob East describes the experience of one institution which began the task of putting in place a system designed to help learners reflect on their learning. The article highlights, however, several challenges involved in implementing such a system, not least of which is the time and effort required by academic staff.

As is customary, this issue concludes with several reviews of books.